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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000408

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND INR/B

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NEPAL: KING APPOINTS BHEKH THAPA AS FOREIGN MINISTER AND RESHUFFLES PORTFOLIOS

REF: 03 KATHMANDU 1664

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. ON MARCH 3, NEPAL'S KING, ON THE RECOMMENDATION OF PRIME MINISTER SURYA BAHADUR THAPA, APPOINTED DR. BHEKH BAHADUR THAPA AS FOREIGN MINISTER AND HEALTH MINISTER. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE HOME MINISTRY WAS TRANSFERRED FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, KAMAL THAPA. BHEKH THAPA'S APPOINTMENT AS FOREIGN MINISTER IS A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE. THE SHIFT IN RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE HOME MINISTRY MIGHT BE DUE TO THE SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF ATTENTION THIS POWERFUL MINISTRY REQUIRES. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) IN AN ANTICIPATED MOVE ON MARCH 3, KING GYANENDRA APPROVED THE PRIME MINISTER'S RECOMMENDATION OF DR. BHEKH BAHADUR THAPA AS FOREIGN MINISTER. THE KING ALSO TRANSFERRED THE HEALTH AND HOME MINISTRY PORTFOLIOS FROM THE PRIME MINISTER'S PURVIEW TO THAT OF MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION KAMAL THAPA AND DR. BHEKH BAHADUR THAPA, RESPECTIVELY. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION FOLLOWS.

DR. BHEKH BAHADUR THAPA:
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND HEALTH

3. (SBU) Since August 25, 2003, Dr. Bhekh Bahadur Thapa has served as Nepal's Ambassador-at-large with cabinet rank. During this period, the Prime Minister held the Foreign Minister portfolio. As Ambassador-at-large, Thapa has participated as de-facto Foreign Minister in such fora as the SAARC Summit in January and the BIMST-EC conference in February. He also took an active role in negotiating with the Bhutanese government on the Bhutanese refugee issue, as well.

Thapa was previously the Ambassador to India, considered Nepal's most important diplomatic posting, from 1997 to 2003. Dr. Thapa has served twice as Nepal's Ambassador to the United States, arguably the second most important diplomatic post, first from 1980-1985 and more recently in 1996. He also served as the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka from 1986 to 1990, and then was appointed for a two-year term as Senior Advisor for Administration at the UN Development Program in Geneva.

In 1994, Dr. Thapa ran for office in the mid-term polls as an independent candidate from Tanahu district, but was defeated by the local Nepali Congress Party candidate.

Dr. Thapa served as the Minister of State for Finance in 1975, was promoted to Minister of Finance in 1976, and remained in the post until 1978. Previously he held the senior civil service position in the Ministry of Finance as Secretary from 1969 to 1971. Thapa also served as the Governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, Nepal's central bank, in 1967, and as the Member Secretary of the National Planning Commission from 1961 to 1967.

Dr. Thapa was born on March 4, 1937 in Tanahu district. He earned a Ph.D. in Economics from Claremont University, California in 1965. With his convivial and sophisticated manner, Thapa is well liked within Kathmandu's diplomatic circles. He is married to Reeta, a physician and public health policy specialist. They have one son and two daughters. Thapa enjoys golf and speaks excellent English.

KAMAL THAPA: MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS,
COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION

4. (SBU) KAMAL THAPA (B. 4 AUG 1955) IS A CAREER POLITICIAN WHO IS REPORTEDLY CLOSE TO THE PALACE AND HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN MOST OF THE MAJOR POLITICAL INITIATIVES BACKED BY THE PALACE IN RECENT YEARS. HE SERVED AS ONE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S NEGOTIATORS DURING THE LAST ROUND OF PEACE TALKS WITH THE MAOISTS IN 2003. THOUGH ONE OF THE

MORE POWERFUL MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (RPP) AS GENERAL SECRETARY, THAPA EARNED A REPUTATION AS AN OPPORTUNIST IN 1996 WHEN HE REPEATEDLY CHANGED SIDES DURING PARLIAMENTARY MANEUVERING TO BRING DOWN THE SHER BAHADUR DEUBA GOVERNMENT. HIS ELEVATION TO THE RANK OF FOREIGN MINISTER IN JUNE 1997 PROBABLY REFLECTED MORE THEN-PRIME MINISTER CHAND'S INTEREST IN LOCKING THAPA INTO THE GOVERNMENT THAN ANY HIGH ESTEEM FOR HIS ABILITIES. THAPA REMAINED IN THE POST UNTIL APRIL 1998, WHEN THE CHAND GOVERNMENT FELL.

THAPA WAS APPOINTED AS THE GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE RPP IN MAY 2003. THAPA WAS ALSO ACTIVE DURING THE PANCHAYAT YEARS, RISING TO MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MINISTER OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTER OF HOUSING AND PHYSICAL PLANNING. THAPA WAS A MEMBER OF NEPAL'S NATIONAL SOCCER TEAM AND, IN 1984, VISITED THE UNITED STATES TO ATTEND THE LOS ANGELES OLYMPICS. OF THE CHETTRI CASTE, THAPA IS MARRIED WITH ONE SON AND THREE DAUGHTERS. IN MARCH 2004, HIS SON WAS ISSUED A DIVERSITY VISA FOR IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES. THAPA RECEIVED A MASTERS DEGREE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE FROM NEPAL'S TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY IN 1977 AND SPEAKS EXCELLENT ENGLISH AND HINDI.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) DR. BHEKH BAHADUR THAPA IS A CONSUMMATE DIPLOMAT WHO HAS PERFORMED WELL DURING IMPORTANT INTERNATIONAL EVENTS, SUCH AS THE SAARC SUMMIT IN JANUARY AND THE BIMST-EC CONFERENCE IN FEBRUARY. HIS APPOINTMENT AS FOREIGN AND HEALTH MINISTER IS LIKELY A RESULT OF THESE SUCCESSES. REMOVAL OF THE HOME MINISTRY FROM THE PRIME MINISTER'S PORTFOLIO MAY SIGNIFY NOTHING OTHER THAN THE HIGH SECURITY AND OTHER DEMANDS THIS IMPORTANT MINISTRY REQUIRES AND THAT THE AGING PM IS UNABLE TO DELIVER. END COMMENT.

MALINOWSKI